

Democracy's Humility: A Reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*

James Kierstead

Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

james.kierstead@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

Hegelian readings of *Antigone* would have us believe that Creon and Antigone are both heroes and villains at once. In this essay, I argue that Creon is in fact the villain of the piece, and a paradigmatic tyrant. Far from representing democratic rationalism, Creon is in fact the antitype of the epistemic humility that was one of the foundational ideals of Athenian democracy. As the Ode to Man and Protagoras' Great Speech in Plato's dialogue both suggest, human expertise ultimately reaches its limits in the sphere of ethics, an area overseen by the gods. For both Protagoras and Sophocles, in my reconstruction, democratic and religious practices are not an arrogant attempt to deny this fact, but a way of humbly accepting it. Through the humbling of Creon and the piety and reasonableness of Teiresias, Haimon, and even the Guard, *Antigone* illustrates an essential characteristic of democracy: its humility.

Keywords

Sophocles – Protagoras – rationalism – humility – gods – democracy

* I thank Simon Perris for his comments. For my title I am indebted to J. Ober, 'Democracy's Dignity', *American Political Science Review*, 106 (2012), pp. 827-846, and 'Democracy's Wisdom: An Aristotelian Middle Way for Collective Judgment', *American Political Science Review*, 107 (2013), pp. 104-122.

I Introduction: Escaping Hegel

Antigone has lost her life through the absolute assertion of the family against the state; Creon has violated the sanctity of the family, and in return sees his own home laid in ruins. But in this catastrophe neither the right of the family nor that of the state is denied; what is denied is the absoluteness of the claim of each.¹

This, in a nutshell, and as most readers will know, was Hegel's reading of *Antigone*. To the question, 'Who are we meant to side with, Antigone or Creon?' Hegel would have answered 'With neither – and with both,' because both represent principles that are equally vital (and equally limited). Though the principles they are seen as embodying may change, Hegel's view that both Antigone and Creon have an equal claim on us lives on, for example in Jonathan Badger's recent interpretation:

Antigone and Creon, images of the rapturous, fundamental human strivings, collide dramatically ... To eliminate one side of this opposition would eliminate the collision, but it would also lead either to an impoverished, cruel existence or to an impotent frenzy ... Both elements are necessary to our being, and yet their opposition to each other is irreconcilable.²

But the continuing influence of Hegel's view has not stopped scholars from coming out in favour of one side or the other. Charles Segal described Creon's actions and utterances through the course of the play as 'a crescendo of arrogance and disaster', and found in Antigone an embodiment of 'the value of affection and emotional ties [and] the uniqueness of the individual'.³ William Calder, on the other hand, defended Creon, asking, 'Was Creon a villain?' and answering, 'I fail to see how.' For Calder, the idea that we should condemn Creon for defending the laws of the state is an anachronistic one, especially in view of the fact that 'in Athenian terms a decree of the *ecclēsia* ... could not be

1 A. C. Bradley, 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy', in A. Paolucci and H. Paolucci (eds.), *Hegel on Tragedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1901/1962), pp. 367–388, p. 371.

2 J. N. Badger, *Sophocles and the Politics of Tragedy: Cities and Transcendence* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 93–94.

3 C. P. Segal, 'Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the *Antigone*', *Arion*, 3 (1964), pp. 46–66, pp. 49, 63.

appealed ... for nobody could be superior to the assembled citizens who were the state'.⁴

Whether Creon can in fact be identified with Athens' democracy has since become a key battleground in the debate. For Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, Creon was the embodiment of the state, while Antigone's 'behaviour and actions would have been perceived by the Athenians as illegitimately subversive of the *polis*'.⁵ On the contrary, said Larry Bennett and Blake Tyrrell, we should look at Creon, not as the 'leader of Athens' but as 'the totalitarian ruler of impious Thebes'.⁶ In her survey of the debate, Helene Foley concluded that 'neither of these arguments based on democratic ideology succeeds in supporting the view that the play is unambiguously taking the side of either Antigone or Creon', because 'each position requires us to suppress or to give insufficient weight to parts of the text'.⁷ Foley's refusal to take sides, of course, takes us much of the way back to the Hegelian view.

In this paper, I will argue that we should take sides, and that we should take sides against Creon. Creon is the villain of the piece, and he is the villain because he is a tyrant; he is, in fact, nothing less than a paradigm of the anti-democratic ruler. A crucial error of previous interpretations, in my view, has been to conflate democracy and the *polis* (or the state), when the two should be kept quite separate, especially when the sovereign is a single man. This has led critics to the facile inference that since Creon is sometimes associated with the *polis*, and the *polis* was in Athenian culture often associated with democracy, Creon must have been viewed as a legitimate, democratic ruler by the Athenian audience. In fact, as we shall see, the text almost never associates Creon with democracy *per se*, as opposed to the state in general. And the state he rules, it is made clear, is an illegitimate one precisely because it is undemocratic.

If Creon is almost never associated with a specifically democratic state, he is also not associated with the values of the fifth-century democracy. This

4 W. Calder, 'Sophocles' Political Tragedy, *Antigone*', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 9 (1968), pp. 389-407, pp. 403-404.

5 C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 109 (1989), pp. 134-148, p. 139.

6 L. J. Bennett and W. B. Tyrrell, 'Sophocles' *Antigone* and Funeral Oratory', *American Journal of Philology*, 111 (1990), pp. 441-456, p. 442.

7 H. Foley, 'Tragedy and Democratic Ideology: The Case of Sophocles' *Antigone*,' in B. Goff (ed.), *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 131-150, p. 142.

claim may surprise some readers, since it goes against an influential school of thought on *Antigone* that was inaugurated by Bernard Knox's classic work.⁸ For Knox, Creon (like the protagonist of *Oedipus Tyrannus*) is punished for a particular sort of *hybris*: the arrogance of thinking that rationalism could be sufficient on its own, without humility before the gods. This sort of rationalism, according to Knox and his followers, was a feature of the sophistic enlightenment of the Athens of Sophocles' day. Hence, in readings of this sort, we should be against Creon, not because he is an autocrat, but because he is a democrat; he exhibits, in exaggerated form, the characteristic vices of 5th-century Athenian democracy.

This way of looking at the play is, in my view, misled. Creon is certainly arrogant, but the kind of arrogance he displays is not the arrogance of the arch-rationalist, but of someone who insistently rejects sound counsel – until, of course, it is too late. His arrogance thus, I will suggest, consists not in too much rationalism, but too little. Creon increasingly takes leave of his reason, and of the evidence of his senses, because he thinks he knows how things will and should be from the outset, and he thinks he can control how things will turn out. In rejecting the advice of others, and in his inability to admit he is at fault and change his mind, he is the very antitype of the virtues of rational deliberation and epistemic humility that were, I will suggest, a key part of Athenian democratic ideology, especially when it came to moral and political matters.

I.1 Creon Tyrannus

In Demosthenes' *De Falsa Legatione*, the orator quotes a number of lines from Creon's opening speech, lines which stress the importance of dedication to one's *polis*.⁹ For Sourvinou-Inwood, Demosthenes' quotation of these lines suggests that classical Athenians would have approved of them: Creon here 'speaks the *polis* discourse, exemplifying democratic patriotism'.¹⁰ But while Creon's words are certainly patriotic, it is less clear that they are democratic – or that Demosthenes took them as such. It is true that Demosthenes uses these lines partly to criticize Aeschines for his lack of patriotism: his accusation that Aeschines 'put his contact and friendship with Philip well above his *polis*' clearly echoes Creon's scorn for the man who 'puts a friend above his fatherland'.¹¹ But Demosthenes also introduces the lines by claiming the former actor Aeschines

8 Esp. B. M. W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

9 D. 19.247, quoting *Ant.* 175–190.

10 Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning', p. 135.

11 D. 19.248; *Ant.* 182–183. Unattributed translations are my own.

must know them, as ‘it is the prerogative of third-rate actors to come on stage as tyrants (*turannous*)’, and indeed, ‘they were specially composed by the poet so that Creon/Aeschines could speak them’.¹² It is clear, then, that though Demosthenes approved of the lines’ patriotism, he also thought that Creon was a tyrant, and that associating Aeschines with him would damage his rival in the eyes of an Athenian jury.

Sourvinou-Inwood’s mistake was to assume that Creon’s dedication to the *polis* was dedication to a specifically *democratic* polis – and that Athenian audiences would have taken it as such. In fact, as Demosthenes’ use of the lines shows, Athenians were perfectly capable of distinguishing patriotism *tout court* from a specifically democratic patriotism. Admittedly, there was a tradition in Greek thought that insisted that, to use Antigone’s own words, ‘a *polis* that belongs to one man is not a *polis* at all’ (l. 737).¹³ But such statements swam against the current of accepted usage, in which *poleis* remained *poleis* even if they were governed by kings or tyrants.¹⁴ This usage is reflected in Creon’s reference to the *polis* in his opening words, which is swiftly followed by his claim to absolute royal authority (‘I hold all the powers and the throne’, l. 173).¹⁵

Of course, this is not to say that *no* monarch in the extant corpus of tragedy is associated with a specifically democratic state. The speech in Euripides’ *Suppliants* in which King Theseus declares that Athens ‘is not ruled by one man, but is a free *polis*’ is rightly recognized as a classic statement of democratic ideology.¹⁶ And there may be other cases in tragedy of monarchs, and even tyrants, who are not portrayed as anti- or un-democratic, even though many are.¹⁷ But an examination of such cases is outside the scope of this essay.

12 D. 19.247.

13 Cf. E. *Supp.* 429: οὐδὲν τυράννου δυσμενέστερον πόλει: ‘nothing is more inimical to a *polis* than a tyrant.’

14 M. H. and T. H. Nielsen (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) lists a number of *poleis* that were, at various points, ruled by a single man. D. Teegarden, *Death to Tyrants! Ancient Greek Democracy and the Struggle against Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 221–236 analyzes the inventory and finds that one-man rule (tyrannical or monarchical) was the regime-type in as many as 70% of *poleis* at its peak in the second half of the sixth century.

15 For more prosaic references to *poleis* under tyrants, see, e.g., Hdt. 5.92; [Arist.] *Ath.* 16.2.

16 Ll. 403–437, with, e.g., R. K. Balot, *Greek Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), p. 81.

17 Creon in Euripides’ *Medea*, for example, is a largely sympathetic figure; cf. Simon Parris’ essay in this volume. For the norm of the anti-democratic tyrant, see R. Seaford, ‘Tragic Tyranny’, in K. A. Morgan (ed.), *Popular Tyranny* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 95–115.

Here my aim is to show that the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone* is not associated with democracy, but rather simply with the state.

Why has this distinction been lost on previous scholars? Let us return to Calder's statement that Creon's position is sound since, 'in Athenian terms a decree of the *ecclēsia* ... could not be appealed ... for nobody could be superior to the assembled citizens who were the state'.¹⁸ This is correct, as far as it goes, at least for the fifth century; what is more debatable is whether the decree promulgated by Creon can accurately be compared to a decree passed by the Athenian assembly. Language that looks democratic is occasionally used of the decree: it is a vote (*psēphos*, l. 60), a law (*nomos*, l. 59), and to contravene it is to act 'in defiance of the citizens' (*biai politōn*, ll. 79, 907). But appearances can be deceiving.

Once or twice, the language used seems ambiguous: Ismene's warning to her sister that burying Polyneices would be *aporrēton polei* (l. 44, forbidden *to*, or *by* the city?), or Creon's statement that the decree has been proclaimed *polei tēide* (l. 203, again, *to* the city, or *by* it?) But it has been made abundantly clear right at the beginning of the play that Creon's decree is not a law that has been passed by an assembly of citizens, but a directive that the tyrant has issued on nobody's authority but his own. In the seventh and eighth lines of the play Antigone asks, 'What is this decree that they say the commander recently laid down for everyone in the *polis*?' That it is the commander who has laid down the law for (or to) the population is thus immediately put beyond doubt; but in case we missed it, Ismene almost immediately reiterates the point, telling her sister that 'they say that he has proclaimed to the city-folk' not to bury Polyneices (ll. 26-28). When Antigone nonetheless expresses her intention to bury her brother, Ismene exclaims, 'even though Creon has banned it?' (l. 47)

Finally, when Antigone persists, Ismene predicts that they will both be destroyed 'if in defiance of the law (*biai nomou*), we overstep the vote and power of a tyrant' (*psēphon turannōn ē kratē*, ll. 59-60). This is the sentence from which the apparently democratic terms 'law' and 'vote' which I quoted above come from. Restored to their context, it is clear that they bear no democratic meaning – except, perhaps, an ironic one. The law (*nomos*) that Ismene mentions is, as we have just seen, an injunction laid down unilaterally by a tyrant; it would thus have had none of the positive connotations that a democratically-enacted law might have had for an Athenian audience. The word *psēphon*, although it could be used simply to mean 'a decree', had much

18 Calder, 'Sophocles' Political Tragedy,' pp. 403-404.

stronger democratic associations;¹⁹ but whatever democratic expectation we might have had are upset by the word that follows, which stipulates that the vote is in fact ‘a tyrant’s.’ What is more, it was the only vote cast, and was coupled with ‘power’ – and is thus really no vote at all, at least not in a sense that would have been recognized by democratic Athenians.

Creon, then, has nothing to do with democracy. As Mark Griffith notes, virtually everyone in the play addresses Creon as a monarch, and they do so with great frequency: he is called King (*basileus*) once (l. 155); Lord (*anax*) no fewer than nine times (ll. 223, 278, 388, 563, 724, 766, 1091, 1103, 1257); Tyrant (*tyrannos*) twice (ll. 60, 1056); and even Chief (*tagos*) once (l. 1057).²⁰ The Messenger refers to Creon’s regime as ‘absolute monarchy’ (*pantelē monarchian*, l. 1163). And the Chorus of Theban elders seems in no doubt of Creon’s untrammelled authority, telling him that ‘it is in your power for you to make any law (*nomōi panti*), both about the dead and about those of us who live here’ (ll. 213–214).

Is there perhaps some room for ambiguity in the word that is most often used for Creon’s decree, *kērugma*? Griffith certainly thinks so, writing that it is ‘a politically neutral term, applicable to democratic and autocratic “pronouncements” alike.’²¹ But none of the lines he cites in support of this show *kērugma* being used in an obviously democratic way, and a few of them even emphasize the non-democratic nature of the decree; at lines 443–444, for instance, Antigone tells Creon it is *ta sa kērugmata*, ‘your decree’. More importantly, when a *kērugma* appears in other fifth-century texts, it is always promulgated by a single leader, usually a *tyrannos* (Soph. *OT* 350; Hdt. 3.52; Th. 1.105). At the same time, the word is never (to my knowledge) used of a decree or law passed by the Athenian people (as opposed to an announcement made by a herald on behalf of the people, as at D. 18.83 and Aeschin. 3.154). The ordinary terms for a decree of the people were quite different: *nomos* in the fifth century and *psephisma* in the fourth.²² It is unlikely, therefore, that the word *kērugma* would have had any democratic colouring at all for a member of Sophocles’ original audience.

Griffith also points out that in his first mention in the play (ll. 7–8) Creon is called a *stratēgos*, ‘commander’ (literally ‘general’), and that ‘an Athenian *stratēgos* on campaign could issue a *kērugma* on his own initiative (even one

19 Ψῆφος=decree: Pind. *Olymp.* 7.87, λιθίνα ψᾶφος. For the many democratic uses of the word, see LSJ s.v. 11.5.

20 M. Griffith, *Sophocles: Antigone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), on ll. 7–8.

21 Griffith, *Sophocles*, on ll. 7–8.

22 See, e.g., M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991), pp. 161–162.

invoking the death penalty).²³ This may well have been the case; but can Creon really be compared to an Athenian general on campaign? Surely not.²⁴ The most important difference is that Athenian generals were accountable to the people: they were elected, went through formal checks before and after they served their terms (*dokimasia* and *euthunai*), and generally sought to carry out the instructions they had been given by the people of Athens.²⁵ There is no sign of any of these institutional means of popular control over magistrates in Creon's case. Moreover, his decree is not an *ad hoc* order issued by a general to enforce troop discipline while on campaign,²⁶ but a domestic injunction that applies to the citizens of his own *polis*. In any case, Creon makes clear that he does not consider himself accountable to the people in his very first appearance on stage.

It is sometimes argued that, as Foley puts it, 'most of Creon's democratic topoi appear early in the play and are gradually eroded by his later tyrannical behaviour'.²⁷ In fact, specifically democratic topoi are emphatically absent from Creon's opening speech – though statements of loyalty to the *polis* are of course not lacking (for example, the lines discussed earlier about the evil of 'putting a friend before one's fatherland', ll. 182–183). Creon begins by praising the Theban elders for their loyalty to the crown, literally, for 'venerating the power of the throne,' hardly a democratic activity (l. 166). He also praises them specifically for their loyalty towards Laius, Oedipus, and Oedipus' children (ll. 165–169); the point of this, as soon emerges, is to establish his own claim on the hereditary monarchy. As Creon puts it, 'I hold all the powers and the throne/ because I am next in kin to the deceased' (ll. 173–174).

Soon afterwards, he mentions 'the man who is directing an entire city' (l. 178). The term he uses for 'directing', *euthunōn*, may have reminded some of Sophocles' audience of the regular retrospective audits of magistrates, the *euthunai*, which, as we have seen, were an integral part of the democratic order. But to conclude that this is a democratic topos would be wrong. What we have here is one man directing a whole city, not a magistrate being audited

23 Griffith, *Sophocles*, on ll. 7–8, citing X. *HG* 1.1.15.

24 It may also be worth pointing out that the term στρατηγός does not have to evoke the specifically Athenian institution of the στρατηγία. In, e.g., Archil. 58.1, it cannot possibly do so.

25 See again Hansen, *Athenian Democracy*, pp. 268–269 for the στρατηγία, and pp. 218–224 for the δοκιμασία and εὔθυναί.

26 Like X. *HG* 1.1.15, the passage cited by Griffith.

27 Foley, 'Tragedy and Democratic Ideology', p. 137.

by several other magistrates;²⁸ and in any case, the word was sometimes used simply to mean ‘rule’ or ‘direct’.²⁹ Soon after this, Creon pronounces his edict, and soon after that, the Chorus makes the very open-ended statement of his powers that I quoted above (ll. 211–214). Creon is not quite satisfied, and tells them, ‘Make sure you stand by what I’ve said’ (l. 215).

Creon’s subsequent appearances do little to change the impression that he is an autocrat. He threatens the Guard with death (and worse, l. 308); he condemns Antigone to death, throwing in a death-sentence for her sister for good measure (ll. 488–489); he even tries to have Antigone executed before the eyes of his son, her fiancé (ll. 759–761). Throughout, he exhibits the classic tyrannical characteristics of obsession with money, impiety, and violation of the bonds of family.³⁰ Along the way, he finds time for a number of pithy expressions of authoritarianism, such as his warning to Haimon that ‘whomever the city sets up in authority must be obeyed – when it comes to small things, just things, and the opposite!’ (l. 667). The precise meaning of the phrase is hard to pin down (is he talking about ‘the opposite’ of small things as well as of just things?), but it is impossible to avoid the implication that the ruler should be obeyed even when his orders are unjust. The democratic-sounding expression ‘whomever the city sets up in authority’ is of course a smokescreen: we already know that Creon has set himself up; and in any case, few Athenians would have agreed that whoever the city vested authority in had to be obeyed in all things. Creon follows this up with, ‘There is no greater evil than anarchy’ (*anarchia*, literally, ‘the lack of a ruler’, 668), including, presumably, tyranny. It is no surprise when he asks his son ‘Isn’t the city thought to be the property of its ruler?’ (l. 738). To Haimon and the Athenian audience alike, the answer to that would have been obvious.

II Democracy’s Humility

If Creon is not associated with democracy (as opposed to the *polis*), it would seem to follow that he cannot be a symbol of the fifth-century democracy of Sophocles’ day. This, of course, is the argument of Knox and his followers, who see Oedipus and Creon as embodying a specifically rationalistic form of

28 For details, see S. C. Todd, *The Shape of Athenian Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 113.

29 For an example from tragedy, see *A. Pers.* 773.

30 See again Seaford, ‘Tragic Tyranny’.

hubris. Peter Euben and Xavier Forde, for example, both follow Knox in arguing that Sophocles is showing us the limits of rationalism, especially the form of rationalism that they associate with the sophistic enlightenment of the fifth century.³¹

The view that rationalism has its limits is, of course, by no means a laughable one. That our rationality is in fact limited by a number of unconscious biases is now well-established.³² At the same time, it may be going too far to claim that rationalism is a form of arrogance in itself, or even that it tends to arrogance. In fact, there is a large extent to which rational enquiry depends upon humility: the humility of exposing our cherished assumptions to falsification, the humility of submitting them to examination by others, and the humility of changing our views when they are found wanting.³³ This type of humility is precisely what allows us to take account of the unconscious biases that, from time to time, we realize that we are vulnerable to.

Knox and those who follow him are, in my opinion, perfectly correct in supposing that rationalism was a key part of Athenian democracy. Where they go wrong is in assuming that this rationalism was the narrow, closed-minded sort of rationalism that refuses to take account of its own limitations, rather than the more thoroughgoing sort of rationalism that remains open to criticism and is always ready for debate. (We might call this broader sort of rationalism 'reasonableness'.) Knox and his followers also go wrong in their interpretation of Creon. They see him as a poster-boy for rationalism; but he is really a only a symbol of a narrower, more limited sort of rationalism. As such, he is the antitype of the reasonableness that was a foundational value of the Athenian democratic order.

That this reasonableness was a foundational value of democratic Athens is suggested, in the first place, by the profusion of institutional fora for

31 J. P. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990); X. Forde, *Tragedy and Pluralism: Ancient Greek Tragedy as a Foundation for Pluralist Theory, with an Application to Pluralist Agonism* (Victoria University of Wellington dissertation, 2015).

32 In no small part due to the empirical work of D. Kahnemann and A. Tversky; for an accessible overview, see D. Kahnemann, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

33 For a classic statement of this view that links science and democratic politics, see K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1963).

deliberation, especially the Assembly and the Council.³⁴ But we can also find statements of the importance of rational deliberation in extant literature. Demosthenes, for example, stresses that the key to finding the best policy is for the floor to be open to several different speakers, each of whom may have a good suggestion (1.1). He also emphasizes the value of criticism: although he admits it would be better if the city simply did what was best from the beginning, the next best thing is clearly if critics pipe up immediately against the city's chosen course (*Prooem.* 49.1). Aristotle, too, in his famous 'summation argument', clearly recognizes the value of combining many different viewpoints (*Pol.* 3. 11).

Of course, there were elements of Athenian public life that were not strictly 'rational.' Old Comedy, especially as exemplified by Aristophanes, with its ribald jokes, is hardly a model of deliberative rationality. To this extent, it may bring Athens away from the purer sorts of rationalism advocated by some modern theorists of 'deliberative democracy'.³⁵ But it does nothing to compromise the claim that a broader rationalism, that is, 'reasonableness' was central to the Athenian democratic order. A crucial part of this reasonableness, after all, is an openness to other ideas and perspectives. And this is precisely what the Festival of Dionysus helped guarantee: that Athenian public debate remained open to all sorts of suggestions and criticisms, even if these came from outside a narrow conception of what was 'rational', polite, or even relevant.³⁶

Now, part of what makes Creon a paradigmatic tyrant in *Antigone* is precisely that he rejects this sort of reasonableness. This is clear not only in his own statements but also in how others react to him. The best example is his exchange, in the play's third episode, with his son Haimon. Haimon begins his reply to what his father has said by implicitly praising his good sense; but then he adds, 'It may be the case that someone else has it right' (l. 687).³⁷ The appeal is clearly to the same values exhorted by Demosthenes and Aristotle: open-mindedness to a diversity of views. David Grene's translation brings out this aspect of the line well: 'Still there might/ be something useful

34 On deliberation in the Greek *poleis* see F. Ruzé, *Délibération et pouvoir dans la cité grecque, de Nestor à Socrate* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1997).

35 For an introduction to this influential theory, see the essays in J. Elster, *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

36 See my 'Deliberative Democracy and Aristophanic Comedy', in N. Villacèque (ed.), *Le Théâtre de la Démocratie* (Rennes: Presses universitaires, 2017), pp. 122-135.

37 γένοιτο μεντὰν χᾶτέρῳ καλῶς ἔχον. Griffith reads χᾶτέραι (printed as χᾶτέραι in his app. crit.). I see no reason to alter the reading of most MSS.

that some other than you might think'.³⁸ Haimon expands upon this thought soon afterwards, in a crucial passage which celebrates open-mindedness and receptivity to others' views (ll. 705-712). And Haimon caps his speech by reiterating this view one final time: (in Grene's rendering again) 'it is good also to learn from those who advise well' (l. 723).

The Chorus supports Haimon's message, saying 'it is appropriate for you, Lord, if he says something useful, to learn from him; as it is for you to learn from him' (ll. 724-725). That Creon angrily rejects this appeal to reasonableness says a lot about the nature of his tyranny, which proceeds, not by embracing rationalism too closely, but by failing to follow through with it when its cherished beliefs are questioned. A central feature of his arrogance is his unwillingness to listen rather than speak; as Haimon asks near the end of this scene, 'Do you just want to go on speaking, and by speaking never do any listening?' (l. 757) It would seem that Creon does, until it is too late; but by then the events of the play have already vindicated what the Chorus has sung earlier, about Polyneices: 'Zeus hates the noise of a big mouth' (ll. 127-128).

III The Limits of Expertise

It is not only Creon's interaction with Haimon that reveals the tyrant's arrogance and inability to listen to sound advice. In fact, the climax of his hubris comes in the play's fifth episode, with Creon's angry dismissal of the seer Teiresias. Like Haimon's speech, Teiresias' words to Creon are full of pithy and direct statements of the importance of learning from one's mistakes and of listening to the advice of others. He points out that 'it is common to all humans to make mistakes,' but that, if a man does make a mistake, he is not stupid (*aboulos*, literally 'lacking in counsel') if he makes amends and is not stubborn. After all, Teiresias says, it is wilfulness (*authadia*) that convicts a man of stupidity (ll. 1023-1028). Teiresias closes his speech with the statement that 'Learning from a good adviser is the sweetest thing, if he says useful things' (ll. 1031-1032). And he asks later, 'By how far is good advice (*euboulia*) the best of possessions?' (l. 1050) *Euboulia* here is two-sided: it is obviously good to be able to give good advice; but the argumentative context, in which Teiresias is trying to convince Creon to accept his advice, makes clear that the accent here is on the ability to *accept* advice.

38 D. Grene (trans.) 'Antigone', in D. Grene and R. Lattimore (eds.) *Sophocles I* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

If Teiresias' entrance sets the stage for the final exposure of Creon's arrogance, it might also bring up a possible objection to the reading of the play I am presenting here. Surely, it might be said, Teiresias is an all-knowing, infallible seer whose higher level of knowledge demands that others follow his advice. Shortly after his entrance he tells Creon, 'I will teach you; obey the prophet' (l. 992). Moreover, Teiresias acquires his knowledge of what will come not from any democratic process of discussion and debate, but from divination (ll. 998-1023). Is this not a sign that arrogance is permissible, as long as one knows the Truth; and that the Truth is to be gained, not by deliberation, but by augury?

In fact, despite his powers as a seer – never doubted in the play, and eventually vindicated – Teiresias is portrayed not as arrogant, but as humble. The humility of his condition, for a start, would have been clear to the audience, as the blind old man was led onstage by an attendant. As if this was not obvious enough, Teiresias calls attention to this fact – and to his own blindness – in his opening lines (ll. 988-990). The line quoted above, in which the seer advises Creon to obey him, can be seen in context as motivated by a sincere desire for the city and its ruler to come to no unnecessary harm (ll. 994-996). Teiresias' first speech consists mainly of a cautious report of some bad omens from the gods; cautious, because Teiresias (we are again reminded), is blind. As he puts it, 'I learned these things from this boy here' (l. 1012). Perhaps the strongest statement Teiresias makes in this first speech is the careful litotes that the squawking and fluttering of panicking birds is 'not insignificant' (*ouk asēmos*, l. 1004).

Teiresias' blindness may seem obvious, but its significance is often overlooked. Teiresias only knows the Truth because he is ready to learn – from the gods, but also from the slave-boy attending him. He only gets things right because he is suitably careful. And he can only see into the future because he has accepted the fact of his own blindness in the present. The gods, who send the signs that Teiresias carefully scrutinizes, are in this reading a symbol of everything that is beyond – or not quite beyond – the ability of humans to comprehend. Our understanding of what is in the gods' minds can only ever be partial, and we must be humble and cautious when trying to attain even that limited understanding of their will.

This brings us back to the interpretations of Knox and his followers, who have always placed considerable emphasis on the role of the gods in Sophocles. For them, the gods do the same work as they do in my reading here – as a metaphor for everything that is beyond humans' ken. But where Knox saw the gods as showing the limits of human rationality (in a rather narrow sense), I would suggest that human rationality (or reasonableness) is necessary precisely because of the inscrutability of divine projects. Teiresias' divination and

the democratic practice of deliberation thus have more in common that they seem to at first. They are both begin with the acceptance that humans lack secure knowledge. Their common source is epistemic humility.

That epistemic humility can ultimately issue in democratic procedures has already been subtly suggested, in the episode described by the Guard (ll. 248-277). As the Guard reports, he and his colleagues, instructed to watch over the body of Polyneices, were surprised by the 'discomfiting marvel' of the body having been covered with a layer of soil (l. 254). Understandably enough, the guards are deeply disturbed by this apparently inexplicable event, especially since they have been charged by Creon with protecting the corpse (ll. 259-263). But, as Jeff Tatum has pointed out, rather than jumping to conclusions about who is in the wrong, the guards have recourse to the sort of institutions that were characteristic of Athenian democracy, including a public debate (ll. 268-274) and the drawing of lots (ll. 274-277).³⁹ They thus provide a counterpoint to the violent certainty that Creon has already displayed.

The glimpse of the otherworldly that they are allowed does not, then, lead to certainty or arrogance in Teiresias and the Guard. On the contrary, it leads them towards a greater consciousness of their own ignorance, and a search for a procedure, of augury or democracy, that enables them to come to a decision in a way that takes account of that ignorance. In this they may reflect a broader characteristic of classical Greek culture. The Greek were clearly a religious people, and religion was thoroughly intermeshed with their political institutions. But claims to knowledge derived from the gods, though they might gain a respectful hearing, were never decisive or trumping in public debate.⁴⁰ The best encapsulation of this is perhaps the powerlessness of specialist oracular interpreters (*chrēsmologoi*) to convince the Athenian Assembly of their interpretation of an important oracle from Delphi (Hdt. 7.143).

That the Athenians often made decisions against or without the advice of experts was, of course, noticed by contemporaries. According to Plato's *Protagoras*, these included Socrates, who asked the famous Abderan philosopher to explain the curious fact that when the Athenians needed to make ships, they consulted shipwrights, and would not listen to anyone else; but when it came to things to do with the government of the *polis*, they would

39 W. J. Tatum, 'Anarchy and Administration in Sophocles *Antigone* 259-77', *Classical Quarterly*, 110 (2015), pp. 91-98.

40 For this as a general feature of Greek culture that paved the way for democracy, see E. Flaig, *Die Mehrheitsentscheidung: Entstehung und kulturelle Dynamik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2013), esp. pp. 182-186.

listen to anyone (319b-e). Protagoras' answer, given in a passage that has become known as the Great Speech (320d-328d), is essentially twofold. First, all humans are endowed by the gods with the essential qualities for moral and political life, a sense of justice and a conscience (*dikē* and *aidōs*, 322c-d). And second, there are no true experts in morality and politics the way there are for things like flute-playing. To put it in another way, when it comes to moral and political decisions, we are *all* experts to a comparable degree (323a-c).

How is this relevant to Sophocles' *Antigone*? As we will soon see, both Protagoras' Great Speech and Sophocles' play contain in them a set of similar views about human capacities, the distinctiveness of moral and political decision-making, and the limits of expertise. They also both place these limits in the sphere of ethics, a sphere which is seen as partly the province of the gods, if only in the sense that questions of morality, like divine affairs, do not admit of decisive expertise. These similarities are especially striking if we focus in on the play's first stasimon, the famous Ode to Man, and read it alongside Protagoras' Great Speech.

Before I discuss these similarities I should acknowledge that Plato's *Protagoras* was, of course, written and circulated many decades after *Antigone* was first produced. *Protagoras* is conventionally classed as an 'early' dialogue, and hence is probably to be dated to sometime in the 390s (or early 380s).⁴¹ The first performance of *Antigone* is usually placed in 442 or 441.⁴² Hence *Protagoras* cannot have influenced Sophocles' ideas in this play; might Protagoras have? Certainly; Protagoras was probably born sometime before 490, and so would have been in his 40s in the 440s. What is more, he very likely travelled to Athens before 443, when Pericles asked him to help draw up a constitution for the new colony of Thurii.⁴³ But though a direct influence of Protagoras on Sophocles is possible, it is hardly necessary; it may be that the works have the similarities they do simply because they emerge out of a common ideological background, the ideological background of the fifth-century Athenian democracy.

The first thing these works have in common is that the gods in both texts can be read as symbols for what lies beyond the limits of humans' intellectual capacities. Protagoras' creation story is of course self-consciously a *muthos*, a fable (319d-322d), as opposed to the more formal *logos* which follows (322d-328d). As for the gods in the story, it would seem unlikely that Protagoras had

41 T. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, 'Plato', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

42 Griffith, *Sophocles*, pp. 1-2.

43 G. B. Kerferd, 'The Sophists', in C. Taylor (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy 1: From the Beginning to Plato* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 244-270, p. 248.

a literal belief in them, especially if we consider his famous statement, apparently from a lost treatise *On the Gods*, that 'Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not, nor of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life' (Diels-Kranz fr. 80.B4). The story about what qualities the gods gave to mortals allows Protagoras to talk about qualities that are inherent in human beings for reasons that are beyond our understanding.

That there are such qualities inherent in human beings is occasionally hinted at in *Antigone*, too. Haimon states the basic point explicitly in the first line of his speech: 'Father, the gods naturally endow (*phuousin*) human beings with good sense (*phrenas*)' (l. 683). In the Ode to Man, man is said to have an even more impressive set of capacities: these include farming (ll. 337-341), hunting (ll. 342-347), the domestication of animals (ll. 347-352), and the ability to build himself shelter and ships (ll. 355-360; 334-336). All of this he achieves by his natural wit (*phronēma*, 355), his 'resourceful quality of invention (*technas*)' that is 'clever (*sophon*) beyond expectation' (Griffith's translation of ll. 365-366). This corresponds to the 'practical ability' (*entechnon sophian*, 321d) that allows humans to stay alive in Protagoras' myth. For a while at least; for they do not yet have the political ability (*politikē technē*, 322b) that will allow them to form communities.

The next, higher phase for humankind after the practical arts consists in the sense and practice of morality. In Protagoras' *muthos*, this is what eventually allows men to live in cities, since without it human beings wronged each other and could not cooperate (322c). In the Ode to Man, the stage of settled *polis*-living comes in the second antistrophe, but after a significant watershed at the end of the strophe, when, after the apparently triumphant, 'Man faces nothing that is to come without resource,' we finally come to a limit to human endeavour: 'From Death alone he will find no escape' (ll. 361-364).

'Death' here is, in the Greek text, the god Hades (*Haidas*, l. 361), and this reminds us that the limits of human knowledge and capacity are to be found at the boundaries of the divine realm. But human claims to expertise also break down in the more human realm of morality, a sphere of human life that, to many Greeks, was overseen by the gods. As the Ode says, man's resourcefulness, for all its impressiveness, has ambiguous results, leading him 'sometimes to evil, and at other times to good' (l. 367). The results that stem from both these possible courses of action are immediately made clear: a man who honours the laws (*nomous*) of the earth and the justice (*dikē*) of the gods is *hupsipolis*, both 'with a high place in his *polis*' and 'with a flourishing *polis*' (ll. 367-370).⁴⁴ But if

44 For the two possible meanings of the word, see Griffith, *Sophocles*, *ad loc.*

someone associates with what is not good 'on account of audaciousness' (*tolmas charin*), then that person is *apolis*, 'without a polis' (ll. 370-375).

The lines that follow this word, in which the Chorus hope that such a man never shares the same hearth as them or thinks the same thoughts (ll. 372-374) suggests that we should imagine that the *apolis* man has been expelled from his city. But there is, perhaps, a hint of a more radical sense: that the *apolis* man's inability to follow the laws or the dictates of divine *dikē* has subtly undermined the stability and survival of his *polis* as a political community. He would then be 'without a polis' in the sense that there might, if everyone were similarly lacking in justice, no longer be a true city around for him to inhabit.⁴⁵ In Protagoras' Great Speech, Zeus tells Hermes to distribute a sense of justice and a conscience to all humans, 'because political communities (*poleis*) would not come into being' if these qualities were as rare as the various fields of technical expertise (322d). Soon afterwards, Protagoras reiterates the point in plainer language, saying that without the capacity (*aretē*) for cooperation, there would be no *poleis* (323a).

There is one more thing that I think that both the Ode to Man and the Great Speech of Protagoras have in common. They are both partly arguments for democracy, or at least parts of an argument for democracy. The full argument for democracy that is implicit in *Antigone* needs the tyrannical character of Creon (and the story of his downfall) to fill it out, of course; and the play is by no means reducible entirely to an argument for democracy. And though Protagoras' Great Speech is more obviously an *apologia* for popular rule (if still not explicitly so), the dialogue as a whole is concerned with topics other than democracy.⁴⁶ And yet, as we have seen, a clear and coherent democratic theory can be extracted from both of these works.

This, in fact, should not be surprising in view of what we know about their authors. Sophocles served the democratic Athenian state in several different capacities, and Protagoras, as we have seen, designed the democratic constitution of Thurii.⁴⁷ Sophocles was also known as 'easy-going' (*eukolos*: Ar. *Ra.* 82), and Protagoras is certainly presented as such by Plato (consider his chivalrous praise of Socrates at the end of the dialogue, 361e). Is it too much to suggest

45 Cf. R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Antigone* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1891), *ad loc.*

46 The arguments of P. Nicholson, 'Protagoras and the Justification of Athenian Democracy', *Polis*, 3.2 (1981), pp. 14-24, that the Great Speech has nothing to do with democracy, have met with little approval.

47 See Griffith, *Sophocles*, p. 1 and M. Giangulio, *Democrazie greche: Atene, Sicilia, Magna Grecia* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), pp. 115-118.

that their geniality reflected the key democratic virtue we have been discussing, that of reasonableness? There is, finally, a tradition that Sophocles was especially pious, and held a number of priesthoods.⁴⁸ As for Protagoras, we are told that he was eventually expelled from Athens for impiety, as a result of the famous pronouncement I quoted above: 'Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not, nor of what sort they may be' (Diels-Kranz fr. 80.B4).⁴⁹ The Athenians obviously misinterpreted this statement, which was not a boast about the capacity of the human intellect, but a warning about its limits.

48 See again Griffith, *Sophocles*, p. 1.

49 See again Kerferd, 'Sophists', p. 248.